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Urban Land

A photograph of the interior of a large aircraft hangar. The image shows a complex network of steel trusses and beams supporting a high ceiling. Several large aircraft are visible on the floor, and a long, dark, narrow structure, possibly a runway or taxiway, extends into the distance. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

AIR + SPACE



providing shade

In the heart of Las Vegas's downtown office district is the first of a series of revamped pedestrian-oriented social districts.

CHARLES LOCKWOOD

The Lewis Avenue corridor in the middle of the downtown office district favored vehicular traffic rather than pedestrians with its narrow sidewalks and lack of landscaping or other pedestrian-friendly amenities (bottom of page). The number of traffic lanes was reduced and their use was reallocated, providing broader sidewalks that better relate to building frontage (below and opposite page).



One of the last places one might expect to find a pedestrian-oriented social district is Las Vegas, best known not for its urban design, but for its casinos, nightclubs, showgirls, and hot weather. But behind all the glitz and beneath the unrelenting heat of the sun lies historic downtown Las Vegas, currently being redeveloped with new office and government buildings, medium- and high-density housing, and a wide range of retail—all on a framework of recently revamped pedestrian-friendly districts.

One of the first of these new social districts is the Lewis Avenue corridor in the middle of the downtown office district, being developed as part of Mayor Oscar B. Goodman's Las Vegas Downtown Centennial Plan, intended to transform downtown Las Vegas into a pedestrian-oriented cultural, civic, financial, and business center. "The Lewis Avenue corridor is very important to the downtown," says Goodman. "First, it shows the city's commitment to actualizing our dream and vision: we put our money where our mouth is. Second, it shows people that they can live in and enjoy an urban environment that is safe, aesthetically pleasing, and a fun place to be."



TOP: FOX; BOTTOM: SHAW GROUP

The Las Vegas metropolitan area has two major casino districts—the original center on Fremont Street downtown, and the newer casinos on the Strip, the name given to the portion of Las Vegas Boulevard south of the historic downtown. “The casinos on Fremont Street found themselves in trouble in 1991 after the Mirage and Treasure Island—the first megacasinos—opened on the Strip,” points out Steve van Gorp, redevelopment officer in the city’s office of business development, who worked on the Lewis Avenue corridor project when he was the planning and development department’s urban design coordinator. “Downtown was losing market share rapidly. Four downtown casinos went into foreclosure,” he adds.

“It was very important to stabilize our economic base downtown, so in 1995, the casinos and the city hatched the Fremont Street Experience—our first pedestrian project—to visually unite and market all of the casinos and 10,000 hotel rooms as one megaresort, as one recognizable tourist experience.” After the success of Fremont Street, the next step was to create a seamless connection between downtown and the Strip by giving Las Vegas Boulevard a landscaped median and landscaped sidewalks, providing a unified identity for the six-mile-long roadway. The city also worked to keep in downtown a number of government facilities that were threatening to move to the suburbs, including the Regional Justice Center, a Clark County and municipal courthouse. In 1996, the city took a Lewis Avenue site it had assembled for a new city hall and instead volunteered it as the location for the new justice center building. Around the same time, the city also secured a new federal courthouse for a nearby Lewis Avenue site.

When Goodman was elected mayor in June 1999, he pledged to devote himself to revitalizing the downtown by building on those initial projects and creating a more unified, pedestrian-oriented downtown. “I recognized that unless we changed the way our downtown acts and looks and is, that we would not be able to compete with the forces that are out there,” he says. This led to the Las Vegas Downtown Centennial Plan, adopted by the city in 2000.

The Centennial Plan, part of the city’s 2020 master plan, established fundamental planning, development, and land use concepts and urban design standards to guide downtown redevelopment and to help transform the face and function of the city’s historic core. Among its tenets were adding a significant amount of new housing, creating new jobs, strengthening the city’s tax base, and attracting private development. The Centennial Plan also created seven downtown districts, including an office core, a parkway center (a 61-acre redevelopment site on the former Union Pacific rail yard), and a casino center (Fremont Street and the adjacent blocks).

The goal was to knit those seven districts into a “vibrant whole” by 2020 with gateways, anchors, distinctive spines like the north-south Las Vegas Boulevard, pedestrian and vehicular linkages, and a broad diversity of land uses that together would create a unique and welcoming urban environment.



One of the first Centennial Plan projects was the Lewis Avenue corridor, which is anchored on the west end by an expansion of the existing Clark County Detention Center and on the east end by the new Lloyd D. George U.S. Courthouse; its midblocks are fronted by the new Regional Justice Center, the historic Fifth Street School currently used as a police station and slated for mixed-use redevelopment, and the new six-story, 103,951-square-foot, \$16.5 million City Centre Place office building, developed by the Aurora, Colorado-based Pauls Corporation. “I promised the developer that if he constructed the building, I’d mold the streetscape to give City Centre Place a wonderful amenity,” explains Goodman.

But molding the streetscape was easier said than done. “The street was overscaled, the sidewalks were narrow, and there was no shade,” says Jim Lee, a principal with the SWA Group’s San Francisco office, which, following a design competition, was given the task of transforming Lewis Avenue.

“The street had abandoned and forgotten pedestrians,” Lee continues. “The U.S. courthouse and police station parking lots, which were separated by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, took up the right-of-way and divided the street, making it impossible for people to walk from one courthouse to the other. It was a very pedestrian-unfriendly environment.”

Las Vegas’s main goal was to have the Lewis Avenue corridor anchor the downtown office core and act as the central spine for



A civic promenade, bordered by landscaping native to southern Nevada and by mesquite and ash trees, leads from the Las Vegas federal courthouse west to Lewis Avenue (this page and opposite page).



the entire city center by creating a social district—a public gathering place—that would be used day and night and link the street's two courthouses. But the corridor was given other roles as well. The office core had become “seedy,” according to Goldman. “I’ve been told that I’m supposed to say it was ‘maturing,’ but it was seedy.” The Lewis Avenue corridor had to jump-start revitalization of the district by helping to unify it and by extending the pedestrian-friendly streetscape established on Las Vegas Boulevard and Fremont Street into the office core. The corridor also had to serve as a catalyst for new private office, housing, and retail development in the office core, as well as be a model for residents, workers, and developers to experience firsthand how the city wanted to transform the rest of downtown.

The Lewis Avenue corridor is being developed through a public/private partnership. The city of Las Vegas created the framework for vibrant street life in the corridor that is attracting private uses and development to reinvigorate the street further. The main element of the streetscape guidelines is the use of trees and other landscape architecture elements to create both beauty and a system

of street identification. The north-south streets like Las Vegas Boulevard, for example, are being planted with palm trees, while east-west streets like Lewis Avenue are being planted with shade trees.

Together, the city and the SWA Group held a series of community workshops to garner public input for the Lewis Avenue corridor plans. The Las Vegas Arts Commission and local artists were the most active participants. “It was an exciting downtown project, and it was intersecting some very important streets,” says Nancy Deaner, cultural affairs division manager for the city’s department of leisure services. “We wanted a presence there.”

The project team began by reallocating space on Lewis Avenue. The city spent 28 months getting the federal government to grant it a permanent landscape easement across 40 feet of the parking lot at the orig-

inal federal courthouse building on Lewis Avenue between Fourth Street and Las Vegas Boulevard, and negotiated an agreement to push back the police station parking lot by 40 feet to the building line, eliminating the barriers that had divided the avenue. Two of the street’s four travel lanes were also removed. The recovered space was then reallocated to create 20-foot-wide tree-lined sidewalks. To prevent flooding in the corridor from the city’s infrequent but heavy rainstorms, SWA tipped the entire ground plane to a collection point to rid the street of standing water.

With the basic framework in place, SWA then implemented its two basic design concepts: fill the corridor with trees, and create a “wash”—a water feature that would be the spine of the streetscape and the office core itself.

Providing shade for people in the hot Las Vegas environment was the top priority in creating a pedestrian-friendly social district, so trees became the single most important design element in the corridor. Rather than use isolated tree wells, a double row of ash trees was planted in a continuous trough of structural soil to create a leafy canopy along both sides of the street. “We wanted to create a living

canopy that returns the street to residents and day-to-day civic life," says Lee.

The ash trees also give the built environment a human scale and buffer humans from the unfriendly architecture of some existing buildings. Trees also were used as a means to announce major buildings: a grove of date palm trees, for example, is used at the main entrance to the Regional Justice Center, extending the entry pavilion onto the street. Desert trees like paloverde and mesquite were used along the wash as specimens and in groupings to provide shade.

The Lewis Avenue corridor wash—now named Oscar's River for (and by) Goodman—was inspired by the Grand Trough Basin, a fountain located ten feet above the street on a stone plinth at the front door of the new U.S. courthouse. The fountain became the source for an artistic interpretation of a meandering, cobblestone-lined stream that unifies the Lewis Avenue corridor physically and visually, and gives it structure, connection, and identity.

Oscar's River, constructed two steps below sidewalk grade so people can sit along its edge, has been landscaped with native arroyo plants to evoke the natural desert landscape around Las Vegas. The wash changes character as it moves along the corridor, evolving from a free-flowing organic form to a system of rills, water basins, and fountain features, such as a cascading water wall that emerges from the lower basin.

Pedestrian crossings over the stream include bridges and informal groupings of natural flagstone. One bridge has been etched with the prose and poetry of Las Vegas writers—the corridor's first public art project. "The corridor is connected to two courthouse facilities, and it just seemed very tied into words," says Deaner. The city's cultural arts division and the Las Vegas Arts Commission are working on other public art pieces for the corridor, including gateway artwork that may be developed next year.

The Lewis Avenue corridor streetscape, completed in October 2002, already has succeeded in getting people out of their cars and onto the sidewalks, a major achievement in sun-drenched Las Vegas. It also has accomplished the city's major goals, among them extending the downtown's new street landscape and pedestrian orientation into the office core. "The corridor provides strong interconnectivity in our downtown," says Chris Knight, the city's deputy director of planning on the project. The corridor also has helped to unify and revive the office core—"a lot of attorneys are moving back to downtown because of the courthouses and the Lewis Avenue improvements," says van Gorp—and it is acting as the hub and a catalyst for private office, retail, and residential development there.



The City Centre Place office building, which opened in 2001, is 100 percent occupied. Two major developers have proposed constructing office buildings on sites available within one block of the Lewis Avenue corridor, and property along Main Street, on the western end of Lewis Avenue, is being bought up for high-rise office, residential, and commercial development.

Retail is also sprouting up in the office core. City Centre Place has two ground-floor retail tenants whose businesses open onto Lewis Avenue with sidewalk cafés. The developer of a multilevel garage at Lewis Avenue and Second Street plans

18,000 square feet of retail space for the ground floor, and the plaza next to the Fifth Street School will be developed with restaurants and service retail space.

Housing is also moving into the office core, including loft-style units and live/work artist lofts. Requests for proposals the city put out for a site it assembled two blocks from the Lewis Avenue corridor encourage high-rise, residence-oriented development with ground-floor mixed uses. The city anticipates at least one or two other major residential projects in the office core. "Over the last year and a half, and especially in the last 12 months, we've had a whole wave of urban housing developers walking in unsolicited, wanting to build mid- and high-rise housing downtown," says van Gorp. "Residential is now our primary market downtown."

"This is the downtown's first market-rate housing in years," he continues. "The mayor and the city council see market-rate housing as the primary base for building up the downtown. Getting people to live and work downtown provides a strong economic base that supports evening commercial activity. For Las Vegas, the quintessential urban sprawl city, to have an urban housing market is phenomenal, and we're doing all we can to support it."

The renaissance of old Las Vegas is beginning. All of the Fremont Street casino and commercial buildings have been purchased over the past two years by young entrepreneurs who are investing in and improving their properties, and the city has spoken with developers interested in constructing new downtown hotel rooms and timeshares.

"Downtown redevelopment always happens slowly, and it takes a long vision to see this through because it doesn't happen overnight," says van Gorp. "But the strategic moves the city has made are beginning to pay off."

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